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ABSTRACT

Four community liaisons for public school programs for limited- English-proficient (LEP) populations discuss briefly aspects of parent involvement. Dama Garate describes the populations served by the Trinity-Arlington Project in the Arlington (Virginia) Public Schools and suggests issues to be considered in parent involvement efforts. Pirun Sen of the Portland (Maine) Public Schools focuses on the kinds of parent involvement and parent contact that have been used there and the problems that have arisen. Hiep Tran Thien and N. D. Duong of the Seattle (Washington) Public Schools look at cross-cultural issues in parent involvement and suggest techniques and strategies to get parents involved. Vilay Chaleunrath outlines major barriers to parent participation and recommends activities for drawing parents into a partnership with the schools. The summary of a response by two specialists is also included. (MSE)

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INVOLVING LEP PARENTS

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INVOLVING LEP PARENTS

Mrs. Dama Garate
Bilingual Community Liaison
Trinity-Arlington Project, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, Virginia

The Hispanic community in the District of Columbia metropolitan area can be categorized into three groups. First came, the Cuban refugees of the early sixties. They were political refugees, but a large majority of them were educated and had the official support of the U.S. government. The adjustment of these refugees was painful but relatively easy because of the official support they received.

The second wave of refugees came from Latin America, people fleeing financial and political turmoil in South and Central America. It is difficult to pinpoint to their exact numbers. A picture of their educational backgrounds is also not clear.

The third group of people have begun to appear in large numbers during the last four years. They come primarily from Nicaragua and El Salvador. They share the same background as other Latin Americans in terms of language, culture and religion, but there are some clear differences between them and the previous two waves. The people from El Salvador come from a war zone and in general are here without official recognition. Most lack a formal educaton. Many of the teenagers are working instead of going to school. In fact, they are encouraged to do so.

In trying to reach this new group and involve the parents and children in the school system, we have had to use different methods--namely, to find out what the needs are and address them. Thus we have to meet such primary needs as counseling, getting food, help with finding jobs--all the things in which schools have not been traditionally involved. Family-related problems also must be dealt with. Salvadoran families, in particular, when reunited have often been separated for many years, and family adjustment can be very difficult. The support of the school is crucial when the students (and the family) can be provided with counseling and thus alleviate the pressure the student is experiencing. Such help can create a better frame of mind and encourage the student stay in school.

Teachers should be more realistic in their expectations. To expect a child to study thoroughly in an overcrowded apartment is unrealistic. To ignore the effects of war on these students is also unrealistic. Teachers should learn about and take into account the experiences and the living conditions of these students and make the necessary adjustments in their demands on them.

Mr. Pirun Sen
Parent Advisory Council Coordinator/Native Facilitator
Title VII Portland Public Schools, Portland, Maine

In communicating with the parents of LEP children, I emphasize that they are partners with the teachers as educators and administrators. I encourage them to learn English and become involved in the social aspects of their children's schools, because they can then teach their own children at home, and they can communicate their children's needs, and their own, through parent groups. In becoming involved, they also become partners in research with the educators of their children.

Most parents are reluctant to participate, so I visit their homes and invite them and their sponsors to parents meetings. In this first contact, I provide as clear an idea about the agenda and what the expectations are for such meetings.

The Parent Advisory Council meets once a month in Portland. Announcements are sent home and they are then broadcast on the local TV station [in English].

Despite the efforts to advertise these meetings, we have encountered some problems. Continued lack of understanding about the nature of the meetings; lack of a consistent place to meet--the sites change, although efforts are made to keep them within walking distance of most families, and sometimes lack of participation on the part of teachers.

However, I have found that persistence produces results, and we now have cooperation between the parents and the teachers. Parents have begun to come to the meetings and the contact with the teachers there has made them more trusting. In turn they have become what we hoped--partners with their teachers in educating their children.

Hiep Tran Thien
Chairperson
Parent Advisory Council, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, Washington

N.D. Duong
Director
Title VII Academic Excellence CAI Project, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, Washington

The Title VII Projects and the Parents Advisory Council (PAC) in the Seattle schools are deeply concerned with the issue of parent involvement in effective schools.

We would like to limit our remarks to two topics: (1) a cross-cultural overview on parent involvement, and (2) suggestions on techniques and strategies to get the parents involved.

Cross-cultural overview on parent involvement. In our capacity as PAC chairperson and project implementor of our respective projects, we have spent the past three years visiting project schools, attending monthly meetings, organizing training workshops for parents, and sharing input in the decision making process. The experiences learned from these activities have helped us become firmly

committed to the idea that parent involvement plays a key role in the success of any educational program.

In Vietnamese culture, school is viewed as an extension entity of the home. The children continue to receive an education which is designed to help them fit into the society at large. The teacher is highly respected and given special social status. The Vietnamese saying, "QUAN, SU, PHU" (the King, the Teacher, the Parent), means that the King comes first, next comes the teacher, and the parent is third.

The perception of the parents is not necessarily accurate. The typical American school environment is not always an extension of the home. Thus the bilingual student becomes the object of a tug-of-war, with the school representing the new and dominant culture and the family embodying the old culture.

However, education is always considered as the first priority for our children's future. Parents regard American schoools as institutions staffed with highly trained teachers and other professionals who are dedicated to serving our children. Thus to visit the school is similar to bothering the teacher, and interrupting the teaching-learning process. Parents come to school only when they are notified of their children's problems which has led to the belief that our parents are not interested or concerned about their children's education. The fact is that parents do not like to interfere with authority.

In reality, very few parents understand the school system, its policies and practices. Lack of English language ability and poor communication skills keep parents away from involvement in school activities such as an open house, teacher-parent conferences, the school dance, school athletic events, etc. These activities are not related to "book learning" so they are considered unnecessary and unimportant.

The Vietnamese child is usually subjected to intense pressure from his parents to study. Learning English is seen as the most urgent need for all of our children as well as for their parents. Children are expected to spend a lot of time alone at their desk "learning" more English. It is not uncommon to find a Vietnamese student who spends entire weekends at home studying.

Vietnamese children are caught between two cultures, one is their own and the other belongs to the host society. The ability to switch back and forth between the two cultures is the essence of cultural adjustment. And upon this ability depends much of their success in being accepted by both forces: their family on one hand, and the new society in which they now live on the other. This is an acquired ability which requires a keen sense of observation and a conscious effort (Center for Aplied Linguistics, 1976).

Suggestions for effective parent involvement. Parents of students in bilingual programs form one of the greatest potential support mechanisms available to school programs. All successful programs have developed strong relationships in this area. But productive parents and community involvement must be planned and developed as an integral component of the overall educational program.

The beginning of a strong bilingual program is the realization on the part of the parents that their input and advice are sincerely desired. A good

starting place is in orientation sessions which will set the stage for this productive working relationship.

Parent and community contributions can take place in any or all of the following areas: Planning the bilingual program; assessment of students; selection of instructional materials; providing cultural resources; volunteering to help in the classroom; providing transportation; assisting with translation of school communications; and tutoring, counseling, etc.

The following elements should be considered as important in the planning and implementation of parent involvement activities:

- Utilization of bilingual aides as effective links and motivational forces to parent involvement
- Using the teacher's community outreach activities as an effective recruitment process for parents for school programs
- Sending school communications in a language the parents can understand, whenever feasible
- Planning orientation and discussion sessions at frequent intervals
- Developing a formalized plan for parent involvement
- Creating of an advisory council where that approach seems appropriate
- Offering a training program, meetings, and workshops for parents to develop their leadership skills to help them function more effectively
- Providing literacy course for illiterate or preliterate parents
- Encouraging school staff's participation in community events in order to create a close connection between school and community
- Organizing frequent school visits so the parents are familiar with the environment
- Demanding a commitment to the program from the school staff and administrators

In summary, effective parent involvement plays an important role in the success of all educational programs. Active parent participation helps increase student achievement. The closer home-school communication lines are, the better mutual respect and trust between parents and teacher.

INVOLVING LEP PARENTS

Vilay Chaleunrath
Executive Director
Indochinese Community Center, Washington, D.C.

Many Indochinese parents in this country do not understand the roles they have to play in their children's educational process for many reasons.

They are uneducated, and many have never attended school. Thus a note that is sent to them is ignored because the parent can't read it.

They do not speak English. Thus they do not know how to provide information when it is requested, particularly when it is in writing.

They are unfamiliar with the school system. Such things as curriculum materials, textbooks, books, workbooks, etc. are strange to them. Elaborate facilities such as chemistry labs baffle them, so they are also ignored.

They are struggling to make ends meet. Many parents work two jobs in order to provide sufficient income to raise the children. They then have very little time to spend with their children, and so are unfamiliar with the school and what the child is actually doing there.

They cannot provide a good environment where their children can study. Living conditions are overcrowded in most cases.

To draw parents into a partnership with the schools demands a lot of patient work on the part of those who are in charge. Some recommendations follow.

More bilingual counselors or workers should be hired who could serve as liaisons between the school (students and teachers) and parents. The liaison person could also be of assistance in identifying other problems, such as housing mental health, etc.

Social events, where parents are encouraged to share items from their cultures should be organized. Potluck suppers with ethnic foods, arts shows where items from each country are displayed, and so forth.

Workshops should be organized where parents can learn how to take more responsibility for their children's education.

Sessions can be scheduled where the teacher can explain to the parents what their child's school work is about so they can follow up on the child's progress.

* * *

Discussants: Ms. Marta Guzman, Resource Specialist, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, Virginia

Mr. Yonnara Keng, Bilingual Community Liaison, Trinity-Arlington Project, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, Virginia

The discussants agreed with the speakers. There is consensus in the following areas:

(1) Trust on the part of the parents needs to be fostered. This is done by constant communication.

(2) Parents should be given the opportunity to develop a plan of action based on their needs and the needs of their children.

(3) Teachers and administrators must be made aware of these needs, and provide some response to problems, thus giving the parent a visible sign that this involvement is truly a partnership.

(4) There must be more bilingual staff in the positions of aides and resource staff available in the schools. The Trinity-Arlington project is a good example of how bilingual aides can help towards the decrease of problems in our LEP student population.